



Engaged in the outdoors, the children are learning the values of their parents—and having a good time. Photo: Gene Sasse

Actively Engaged

The purpose-driven garden

by LYDIA PLUNK

WHAT COULD BE MORE IDYLIC than to raise a family in an oceanfront home on an oversized lot? Blessed with two energetic young sons and a home in Newport Beach, Murphy and Bernardette McCann believed they were living at the pinnacle of paradise. That is, until a close encounter with a reckless driver caused them to redefine their definition of perfect.

Determined to find a family home supportive of their outdoor lifestyle and where the boys could play safely, the McCanns decided to move. Their hunt through real estate listings was quickly satisfied when they found a property within a ten-minute walk to the

waterfront. Built on a bend in the road, its entrance barely peeking over the canyon's crest, the house hugged the downward slope of the hillside providing both privacy and shelter from the street. They considered its best feature—largely unseen from curbside—a spectacular backyard view of the Upper Newport Bay Ecological Reserve.

The large terraced lot held several mature trees and the prospect of a “perfect [location] to install a zip-line.” The family’s work was just beginning. They spent the first nine months at their new home performing serious “gardio,” Bernardette’s term for strenuous gardening.



Chunks of recycled concrete from the existing site and neighborhood demolition projects form a stepping stone path. Flowers mingled with vegetables encourage pollination. Photo: Gene Sasse

PLANTED

Meanwhile, Bernardette put her interior design skills to work creating a garden with an articulated purpose. Primarily, this paradise is participative. The McCann's oldest child was diagnosed with a sensory-related learning disability and Bernardette intended for the garden to provide hands-on support for his lessons and therapy. She asserts, "When does real learning happen? When you apply it in real life. It doesn't get any more real than when your hands are in a garden."

Bernardette believes that all property "has its own vision." Her intent was not to impose her desires on the land, but to "be respectful of what the space calls for from its own natural elements." Working in collaboration with an educator, the landscape transitioned from a rather

unimaginative yard into a sensory-rich environment. She says, "The garden is not a replacement for traditional occupational therapy; it is an empowering adjunct."

Creative thinking translates classroom lessons into outdoor adventures, while outside stimulation serves as positive reinforcement. The boys don't care that the trampoline and zip-line develop their senses of gravity and coordination. They just enjoy.

Less than two years since taking possession, the McCann's mission to infuse the garden with purpose, joy, and beauty is a triumph. In the once ho-hum yard, visitors can now meander recycled concrete paths through bountiful beds filled with herbs and vegetables. A gurgling water feature invites birds into the scene.

The garden was on the 2012 Sherman Gardens and Library tour, and the project evolved into the founding of "Dirty Girl Garden Design."



Comfortable chairs grouped in the dappled shade of the front yard allow adults to socialize while children play. Photo: Gene Sasse



ABOVE: A colorful mix of edible and ornamental plants.

LEFT: At the center of the bisecting paths in the front garden, a gurgling fountain adds the element of sound and invites birds to visit.

LEFT BELOW: The ecological reserve just beyond the backyard provides a beautiful view and habitat for birds and wildlife.

Photos: Gene Sasse



Life lessons from the garden

- Work with what you have. When a eucalyptus stump proved difficult to remove, the couple built the fire ring around it, stacking firewood nearby. Like people, so few things are a total waste.
- Thrift. Retaining walls and steps throughout the space were constructed from railroad ties, chosen for their modest cost and heavy wooden groundedness.
- Relax and observe. A handful of chairs transform an unused corner of the garden into a nifty space to read the newspaper.

Out front, adults can watch neighborhood children at play from comfortably cushioned low-slung chairs positioned on always perfect “grass”—the sort that never needs mowing. Bernardette is delighted with artificial turf’s year-round perfection and easy maintenance; even under their many trees “You just blow it and hose it.” In addition to standing up to active children running with their dog, it doesn’t harbor fleas and ticks.

Bernadette designed the backyard as a learning toolbox focused on fun. Every day in the garden is an opportunity for the children to hone their observational skills. What plant flourishes where and not a few feet away? Why might that be? Could it be variations of daylight or water or soil amendments? What birds fly in to visit which plants? What happens when dad goes up against foraging raccoons? How exciting is it when three skunks visit?

In an age when children are routinely play-deprived, the McCanns are proud to have created a beautiful, purposeful landscape that celebrates the senses. Outdoor play and interaction with the garden joyously instill the family’s values of respect for the land, community, generosity of spirit, and fun.

Lydia Plunk writes about the glory of garden-centered living in Southern California.